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War May Aid Gays' Right to Serve

by Wade Lambert

The first full-scale war to begin since the emergence of an active gay-rights movement is raising sensitive new issues for the military and for homosexuals facing service in the Persian Gulf.

Gay veterans groups and gay-rights attorneys claim the military in recent weeks has relaxed its ban on homosexuals because of the war--but still plans to throw them out after the fighting is over.

Although the Pentagon insists that no change in policy has occurred, at least 14 gay and lesbian reservists across the country were cleared by their unit commanders to serve in the Persian Gulf after stating their sexual orientation, the lawyers and gay veterans said.

But these reservists, who informed their commanders that they are gay and want to serve in the Gulf, also were told that discharge proceedings will be begun against them after they return from the war, according to the lawyers. About half of the reservists have since been sent to the Persian Gulf, the lawyers said.

If the military is, indeed, allowing gays to serve during the war, those who return may be able to raise strong legal challenges to the military's longstanding policy of excluding them, some lawyers said.

The Pentagon bans from active duty and the reserves anyone who is homosexual... Although gay veterans in recent years have increasingly challenged the ban in court, it has been upheld. The military says the ban is necessary to maintain discipline and good morale among the troops, and that closeted homosexuals are more susceptible to being blackmailed.

The issue surfaced anew during the past three weeks as gay groups began receiving calls from reservists. "Commanders in general have said, 'Well, it doesn't matter, you can go anyway,'" said Sandra Lowe, an attorney with Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, a national gay-rights legal group, which has represented gays challenging the military ban. "Now that there's a war on, they're willing to let people go over."

Some gay-rights attorneys say after the war they will be looking for openly gay people who served in the Gulf and who are willing to go to court to test the military's ban. William Rubenstein, director of the gay-rights project of the American Civil Liberties Union, said the issue for the courts to decide in such cases will be whether the military can enforce the ban after knowingly allowing the gay person to risk his or her life in combat.--Excerpted from The Wall Street Journal, 1/24/91; thanks to John W. v

Gay-Bashing: A Marine Tradition

Commentary by Earl Willis

While getting my daily television fix of Gulf War on CNN, I saw a Marine General instructing his men on why they fight.

"You won't be fighting for your country, your mother, your girl back home or apple pie," he said. "You will fight for your buddy."

In spite of myself I burst into laughter, turned to my housemate and asked, "Did you hear what I just heard?"

"Sounds faggy to me," he replied.

Recently I ran across an article about the Navy's concern over getting rid of lesbians, "even if they are some of the most dedicated and hardest working sailors."

Another very recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* concerned openly gay men and lesbian reservists leaving for the Gulf to fight for their country. These reservists were being shipped to the Gulf with the promise of immediate discharge upon their return home...if they return home.... This, too, fed memory of my own military service.

In 1956 I had joined the US Air Force almost immediately upon graduation from high school. I had not yet turned 18 and was one frightened young recruit.

While I was going through the horror of basic training, the Air Force gave me an assignment that scared me for years and further implanted fear, humiliation, and self-denial into my young personality, which was already warped by my "southern heritage" of bigotry and hatred for ideas and things that were different.

My drill instructor informed me one evening, after my flight had returned from chow, that I had been assigned barracks guard duty that night in the "queer barracks." This was a barracks filled with young men who were awaiting less than honorable discharges from

the Air Force because they were homosexuals.

When I arrived for my night time assignment, the barracks guard on duty gave me a large billy club. The air policeman who was with him for the changing of the guard gave me instructions. "Every fifteen minutes you walk through the barracks and use that club if you have to," he said. "You got to keep these g...d... queers out of each other's beds. Check the latrine...hell, they'll do it in there if you don't watch 'em."

Then they left me alone for the evening. I didn't patrol the open bay barracks as instructed. This was not, let me rush to say, because I respected those men's privacy. I think I was scared of what I might see. From the door of the barracks where I stood guard, with a pith helmet on my head and a billy club in my hand, I could see down the open barracks. It looked like there were twenty men occupying the beds. As I recall, the barracks was very quiet.

I only met one of those men, and that was an experience I will never forget. It was very late at night, and I was looking out the double screened front door when I unexpectedly heard a voice behind me. I had heard no one approach.

"You got a cigarette?" the deep voice from behind said. Startled, I whirled around to face a large well-built boy wearing nothing but a pair of GI boxer shorts.

"Yeh, sure," I said. I dug into my socks to get the cigarette pack and lighter. He took one, and after I lit his cigarette, he thanked me and walked into the latrine. Stunned, I watched him enter the door of the latrine. He was not what I had expected a "queer" being less than honorably discharged from the service to look like.

When he left the latrine he paused by the butt can hanging on the wall to put out the cigarette. "Thanks again. Good Night."

I watched him as he walked back into the darkened open bay. My stomach was knotted around something very cold in the pit of my being, but I didn't understand what. I have never really left that queer barracks at Lackland AFB in Texas. The memory haunts me to this day. v